

# Key Elements in the Successful Clinical Experience of Pre-service Teachers

Norshiha Saidin

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores final year pre-service teachers' perception of the key elements critical to successful in-school clinical experience. The paper focuses on how a teacher education program aids prospective teachers in their transition from students to professionals who are able to take responsibility for others. Data was collected through a survey given to 104 TESL student teachers who had undergone 14 weeks of guided clinical experience. A focus group interview provided further data to explore the learning moments from the perspective of these student teachers. The key elements identified by student teachers for successful school placement are effective communication, especially in building positive personal and professional relationships with mentor teachers and supervisors as well as verbalizing shared reflections. The data provide insight into how ideas about teaching, learning and mentoring evolve and about the role of mentors and student teachers. Another critical element concerned how to communicate and reach out to troubled and reluctant learners.*

**Keywords:** Pre-service clinical experience, teacher training, effective communication

## **Introduction**

The clinical experience is an important and invaluable period of a teacher education program, providing opportunities for teaching practice that bridge the gap between classroom and university, giving students a deeper understanding of the expectations of school, society and the teaching fraternity. The key questions are: how successful is the clinical experience as an induction into the teaching profession and what are the critical elements that support the final year clinical experience?

## **Review of literature**

### **The importance of the clinical experience**

School placement and clinical experience in education concentrate on the mastery of teaching skills, the development of professionalism and socialization into the professional norms and moral codes of the teaching practitioner. Darling-Hammond (2006a) suggests that the extent and the quality of teacher education are important for teachers' effectiveness and that they add significant value to the general knowledge and skills that teachers with a strong subject matter background bring to the classroom. An effective teacher education preparation must be grounded in theory yet provide student teachers with relevant and extensive practical experience to become skillful and capable teachers. The clinical experience is an essential component of any teacher education program as it provides a rich and real learning environment for teacher trainees to learn to reason and think critically. The demands of the diverse classrooms are such that 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers must be able to tailor curriculum and teaching as well as teach explicit strategies to allow students to become successful learners (Asariah, 2009; Lee, 2004; Darling-Hammond,

2006b). Ultimately, the key to better schools is better teachers and powerful teacher education programs can produce these.

A number of researchers have emphasized the critical role of the mentor in the clinical experience. Shapiro, Hazeltine and Rowe (1978) identified the various functions of the mentor including:

Peer pal – an individual with whom you collaborate with and share mutual support and benefit.

Guide – an individual with more extensive knowledge and experience and shares it for your benefit.

Sponsor – an individual supplying financial and material support

Patron – a significant other who utilizes his or her authority to assist a protégé

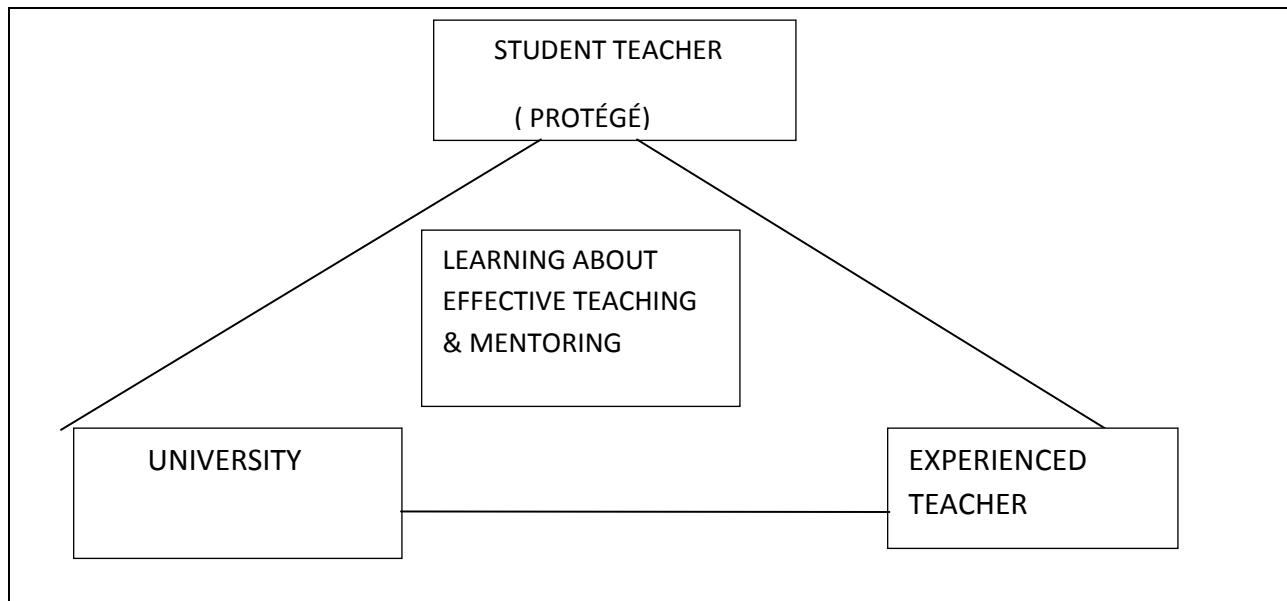
Mentor – an individual with experience, knowledge and influence who is able to guide, advocate for and teach a protégé.

The idea of mentoring has evolved over time and Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995) provide this excellent definition of “an off-line person who helps another individual to address the major transitions or thresholds that the individual is facing, and to deal with them in a developmental way”.

Clearly, the mentoring process is interactive and dialogic. The mentor learns from the process and the protégé, and the protégé learns from the mentor and the process. A study investigating practicum in 21<sup>st</sup> century New Zealand identifies this as the concept of reciprocity, i.e. “a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators’ practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective” (Ministry of Education, New

Zealand, 2008, p. 20). In teaching practicum, supervision is seen as an activity of two or more people that are engaged in structured and unstructured interaction for the benefit of a new teacher's professional development.

**Figure 1 The mentoring process**



(Source: Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2006b)

In terms of clinical experience, supervision and mentoring can successfully promote teacher efficiency, critical thinking and reflection on instructional methods. Lack of knowledge of supervision and insensitivity to the needs of a pre-service teacher may result in an unproductive working relationship (Kervin et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2006b). Attaining the right balance hinges on the effectiveness, knowledge and openness of the instructional leader and a successful supervisor will ease a trainee's transition to the profession.

## **Teacher Preparation in Malaysia**

Malaysia has seen major policy changes in education in the last five years ranging from increased budgetary freedom for schools, greater autonomy for high performance schools and the introduction of standards of teaching. At the same time, stakeholders such as parents and employers expect greater accountability from educational institutions. Consequently, governmental policy with respect to accountability and accreditation and the development and implementation of standards of teaching place higher demands on teacher education programs to produce work-ready professionals and practitioners who are pedagogically and psychologically competent and technologically proficient (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2009; Asariah,2009).

Teacher education falls under the jurisdiction of the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE).The standardized curriculum at the 27 Institutes of Teacher Education (ITE) or previously known as Teacher Training Colleges encompasses six main components: a) teacher dynamics, b) knowledge and professional competence, c) knowledge in subject option and specialization, d) self-enrichment, e) co-curricular activities, and f) practicum. Fundamentally, the curriculum for the training of Malaysian primary school educators focuses on a student's professional, academic and personal development (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2006). Alternatively, the training of secondary school educators is conducted by local public universities and each offers its individual teacher education program. Below is a synopsis of the teacher education model implemented at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA.

### **The Teacher Education Model at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia**

The Faculty of Education's main mission is to educate professional Bumiputera teachers for secondary schools and tertiary establishments in Malaysia. Founded in 1997, the Faculty began with four departments with TESL being its mainstay and niche department.

The Bachelor of Education (TESL) is a four year program awarding students an Honours degree in TESL and a qualified teacher status. For three years, the program focuses on subject matter preparation and pedagogic mastery. This comprises compulsory University courses, education component subjects which provide a strong foundation in education, general professional studies courses with a major in the principles and theories of teaching of English in secondary schools and a minor either in English Literature, Counseling or Music. The clinical experience or practicum takes place at the beginning of semester seven and students are assigned to a school for 14 weeks. The involvement of the local schools is established through the appointment of teacher experts who bring in their own knowledge and experience direct to the university during the practicum seminars. The series of practicum seminars help students to link theories and knowledge with the practical realities of teaching. During the actual teaching practice or clinical experience, students work closely with mentors from the school as well as with their university supervisors. The clinical experience is a vital induction into teaching and most students look forward to it as the culmination of their training. In the final semester, students return to complete their final year and participate in the post practicum seminars. The seminars provide them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to learn from the opportunities and attempts at linking theory and practice, to reflect on the challenges in developing and sustaining a professional culture, as well as the need for lifelong learning and continuous professional development. For some, the final semester is also a turning point as they envision the future, whether to teach or not to teach.

## **Methodology**

This research sought to identify the key elements that support a successful in-school placement for final year pre-service teachers.

Twenty survey questions were developed in order to fulfill the research objectives of identifying the key elements in successful school placement. The research instrument was a survey, a “one-shot design” (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okley, 2006) and was distributed during a post practicum session and was within a week of the student teachers completion of the 14 week structured clinical experience. The average completion time for the survey was 15 minutes and students had the opportunity to return their responses anonymously.

The scope of data collection was further extended with a 90 minute focus group discussion with eight student teachers. The group discussion contextualized the data collected and created an interactional situation to interpret and give further details regarding the clinical experience. Patton (1990) suggests that the group discussion is “a highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique [which provides] some quality control on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that weed out false or extreme views... and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view... among the participants” (p. 36).

The practicum cohort surveyed was the batch of April 2010 comprising a total of 104 TESL trainee teachers.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Three critical elements were identified as keys to success for a positive clinical experience. These were building relationships and effective communication, being able to reach out to troubled and reluctant learners and making important teaching decisions that were informed and supported by research.

**Table 1 Critical elements for success in clinical experience**

Dimensions of teaching skills	Percentage who “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”
	N = 104
Understand how different students are learning	74
Set challenging and appropriate expectations of learning and performance for students	72.5
Help all students achieve high academic standards	50
Understand how students' social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development influences learning	76
Identify and address special learning needs and/or difficulties	54.4
Choose teaching strategies for different instructional purposes and to meet different student needs	76
Help students become self-motivated and self-directed	73
Resolve interpersonal conflict	51
Understand how factors in the students’ environment outside of school may influence their life and learning	81.5
Conduct inquiry or research to inform your decisions	34.6
Develop rapport and work with mentor and supervisor to support learning	38



Maintain discipline and an orderly, purposeful learning environment	65.4
Plan and solve problems with colleagues	72.1
Assume leadership responsibilities in your school	60.5
Provide a rationale for your teaching decisions to students, parents, and colleagues	51.9
Use technology in the classroom	50
Develop a classroom environment that promotes social development and group responsibility	70.2
Develop students' questioning and discussion skills	71.1
Engage students in cooperative work as well as independent learning	77.9
Use effective verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to guide student learning and behavior	67.3
Give productive feedback to students to guide their learning	71.8

As shown in Table 1, the survey showed that the student teachers felt significantly prepared for fourteen of the twenty dimensions of teaching skill, awarding a score above 70 % for these areas. Of the student teachers 81.5% were confident that they understand how factors in the student environment outside school influenced their students' life. Overall, in terms of teaching skills, the student teachers felt that the program had prepared them well for the clinical experience and gave them sufficient preparation to understand and teach their learners.

However, several elements of concern emerged. First, only 54.4 % of the respondents said that they could identify and address special learning needs and/or difficulties among students, and 50% of the student teachers felt that they could help all students achieve high academic standards. Of greater concern is that 34.6% of the teachers asserted that they were not prepared to conduct inquiry or research which could be of use to inform their decisions. Finally, only 38%

of the students were able to develop rapport and work with mentor and supervisor to support learning. In the focus group discussions, these elements were further discussed .

### **Effective Communication & Building Relationships**

In the first few weeks, the student teachers' priority was to get to know the context of teaching including understanding the school policies and procedures:

*“My main focus then was to... observe what school policies were, how my mentor interacted with her students and the way she was able to maintain control of the class”* (student TA).

The student teachers reported that getting to know the mentor teacher personally and professionally was their greatest challenge. They were assigned a mentor from the school and another supervisor from the university. They concurred that establishing a positive relationship with both individuals was a crucial factor in determining the success of their clinical experience.

*“Getting to know my mentor and also finding out what she expects of me is really difficult. She is extremely busy and I get very little feedback”.* (Student JB)

*“My mentor expects me to teach like her and discourages me from trying out anything different. I'm quite frustrated as I have other ideas but I don't want to get low grades... ”*  
(Student TA)

*“My supervisor from the faculty is open- minded but she has high expectations...”*  
(Student KD)

Current thinking on teacher development suggests that the supervisor and trainer should focus on the student teacher as a person. Student teachers have their individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as varying degrees of knowledge and experience. The objective of the clinical experience is to allow student teachers to experience classroom teaching via collaboration with other professionals and to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This requires patience, opportunities for practice and self-awareness as well as allowing them to develop their teaching style.

The data from the study proposes that the mentor teacher should not perceive himself/herself as a model teacher with model lessons nor allow the student teacher to view him/her as such. Maintaining a relationship that is open and honest where both parties can learn from each other, engaging in professional discussions and communication are important aspects of this positive relationship.

Over half of the participants identified that by using effective listening skills and clear communication, positive relationships can be forged with mentor teachers in schools and with supervisors. *“A willingness to listen, being able to accept criticism, being humble”* are also important characteristics in student teachers to expedite successful forging of relationships with mentors and supervisors.

Another challenge faced by the student teachers in this study is the availability of time to interact and conduct discussions. All of them were aware of the need for flexibility to allocate time that was mutually convenient for their mentors and supervisors. The following were identified as popular options for meeting times: “during recess time”, “before school”, “after school” and the last resort would be “arrive early, leave late” or the social network option “try Face booking”.

The data also highlighted very vividly that avoiding communication with their mentor had a negative impact on the overall experience. It was definitely not the case of “no news is good news”. In terms of the input received, a number of respondents highlighted the usefulness of receiving written feedback as it provided them with concrete suggestions and evidence that they could refer to in their learning moments. Written notes from supervisors aided the student teachers’ reflective revelation and self–discovery.

*“ ... sometimes I simply can’t understand what my lecturer is telling me but later when I look at her notes I get it”* (Student MM)

*“It’s really hard to accept criticism and after the observation I’m so nervous... I can’t accept what she’s saying ... but when I read what she has written in the practicum book, I understand what she’s trying to say. ”* (Student ZM)

The observations above highlight the unpredictability and intensity of teaching practice and shows that communication is enhanced via extending the channel to written feedback. Verbal feedback should be supplemented with written notes that aid student teachers’ reflective revelation and self- discovery.

### **Reaching out to Troubled and Reluctant Learners**

For a majority of student teachers in this study, aspects of language learning, classroom management, discipline and developing ways to reach out to troubled and reluctant learners are clearly important issues that must be resolved. Increasingly, schools are detecting a higher number of students suffering from social, emotional or behavioral handicaps, and some students are growing up in impoverished or abusive homes. Our student teachers need special methods to establish strong relationships with such learners.

*“I have this student who is so depressed because the parents are separating. She doesn’t participate in anything and sometimes doesn’t come to class. What do I do?”*

*(Student TA)*

*Some of them are doing things that they shouldn’t do...smoking...clubbing .How Puan ... they tell me these things... but should I report them?*

*(Student ZM)*

*“Madam, one of my students is pregnant, she is very passive in class and ignores me. Help me Mam !”*

*(Student MM)*

Evidently, student teachers need knowledge of diagnostic approaches as well as the pedagogy and repertoire of teaching strategies to reach these troubled students. The researcher firmly advocates that the faculty introduce student teachers to issues such as teaching exceptional children, children and youths at risk and students with learning challenges. Currently, the faculty offers a minor in Counseling and when dealing with challenging students, this is clearly an advantage.

According to Brown (2001), student teachers are not merely language teachers but are also critical pedagogues and agents of change. Language teachers deliver language lessons and also participate in students’ lives. We live in a world that is desperate for change, a change from discrimination to tolerance, from hopelessness to empowerment, and from competition to cooperation. It is this balance of delivering the technical knowledge as well as being able to relate with students that are important characteristics of good language teachers. The comments

below show that the student teachers are attentive to the need to reach out to their troubled students.

*“I realize that if I want to help my students I need to go the extra mile...” (Student JB)*

*“I want to help them, how do I motivate them ... “ (Student MK)*

*“... because of my age they turn to me for help and I really want to help them..”(Student MM)*

The responses above support the challenge facing many student teachers that the practicum is a test of physical and mental capacities. The practicum period immerses them in a culture both novel and puzzling and demands multiple leadership skills. “Teachers hold a central position in the ways that schools operate and in the core functions of teaching and learning, what is new are increased recognition of teacher leadership, visions of expanded teacher leadership roles, and new hope for the contributions these expanded roles might make in improving schools” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 255). This highlights the need to study and cultivate skills of leadership and maturity of pre-service teachers. Many supervisors bemoan the lack of maturity of their protégés who insist on behaving like students and fail to take ownership of their practicum experience.

### **Research Based Teaching**

Second language teachers are always on the search for better ways to help students, implying that teachers are involved in educational research. However, since formal research tends to be perceived as a difficult process, most teachers feel that it is out of their reach. The student

teachers participating in this study voiced their concern regarding their competence in reaching out to their students especially those with learning difficulties. As much as the teacher education program strives to prepare teachers with required skills and relevant pedagogical knowledge, it is impossible to equip teachers for all possible circumstances. Therefore, it is pertinent that teachers conduct research and reinforce their teaching with reading. This awareness of the need for research based teaching was voiced by several student teachers:

*I wanted my mentor and my supervisor to help me solve my problem, the students were not motivated. I didn't know what to do....”* (Student LJ)

*“There was no one right way to teach grammar and I had to find something fast, I looked up on the internet...”* (Student MM)

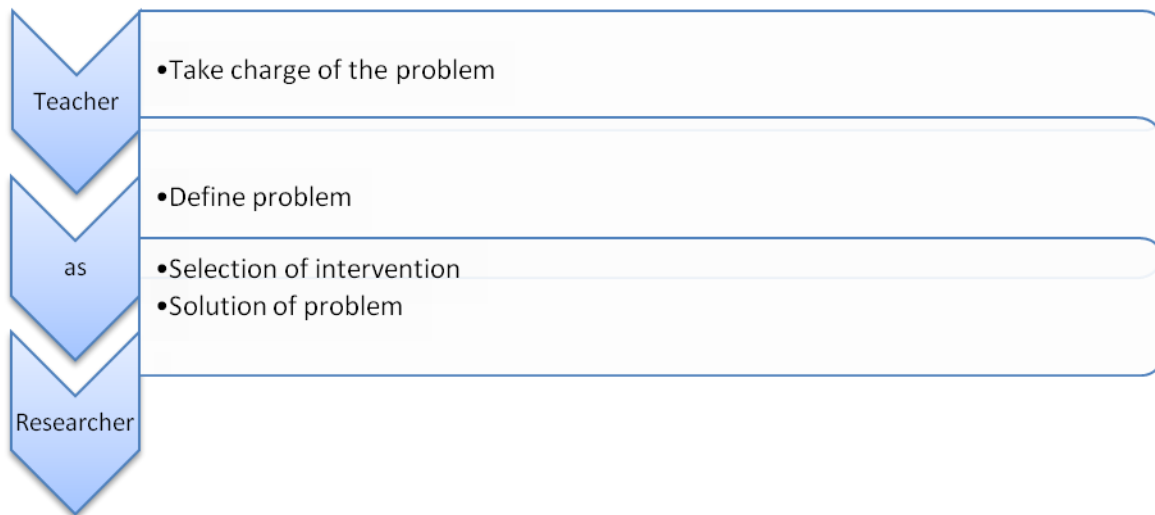
*“My supervisor said it was up to me, she asked me to find out and basically read... She said I would know best what is most suitable for my students ...”* (Student KD)

*I really didn't have much time to read but I realized I had to... I felt better prepared ...also it gave me ideas to improve my lessons”* (Student MM)

The reaction of most student teachers was to turn to the mentor or supervisors for aid. In most cases, they were advised to take charge of the problem and to develop their own solutions. This provided the student teachers with an excellent opportunity to embark on action research as well as research based teaching. Research is not a difficult process but a powerful tool to systematically study and solve some of the problems in our day-to-day experience (Kervin et al., 2006). Student teachers must be encouraged to take charge by identifying the problem through careful observation before selecting an appropriate intervention. This is an important part of professional development and is a vital aspect of a successful final year in school placement. It is

therefore strongly recommended that action research and classroom assignment based research is emphasized in our teacher preparation programs to equip student teachers with this valuable skill which in turn will improve their own understanding of the teaching – learning process.

**Figure 2 Teacher as Researcher**



(Source: Kervin et al., 2006)

## **Conclusion**

This study is about how students are transformed into educators and professionals. It is concerned with how students develop their identities as teachers, extend their professional relationships and establish their moral codes and norms. In particular, it explores student teachers voice and captures their perceptions on what they see as the key elements that support successful final year clinical experience.

There are a number of implications of this research. First, it is apparent from the data that the key element in successful final year clinical practice lies in developing positive personal and



professional relationships. The process entails an accurate assessment by student teachers of their own personal strengths and weaknesses before acquainting themselves with their mentor's and supervisor's ways. Second, it is imperative that student teachers take a proactive approach both in creating convenient discussion opportunities with mentors and supervisors as well as in taking charge of the teaching experience and any classroom predicament and collectively reaching solutions posed in the teaching of the class. Finally, the student teachers reported difficulty in meeting the challenges of student needs, particularly in low ability classes, and for some, the challenges were overwhelming.

Basically, final year clinical experience is critical to teacher preparation and through introspection and awareness of their competence, student teachers are in a more favorable position to succeed in clinical practice.

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